

## Taíno

Taíno Indians lived in the Greater Antilles (made up of Cuba, Jamaica, and what is now Haiti and the Dominican Republic), and Puerto Rico in the Caribbean Sea at the time when Christopher Columbus' arrived in the New World. We don't know about their history before the Spanish arrived.



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In spite of having been almost completely wiped out within a few decades of the Spanish arrival, the Taínos left us some of their cultural heritage. The names of many towns (Mayagüez, Coamo), foods (mamey), instruments, trees and plants are original Taíno names. Many Taíno implements and techniques were copied directly by the Europeans, including the bohío (straw hut) and the hamaca (hammock), the musical instrument known as the maracas, and the method of making cassava bread. We have little detailed knowledge of Taíno culture, religion and daily life. What we know comes from Spanish documents and from recent excavations.

The Taíno carved symbols in stone, but had no written language.



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They had no calendar, and could count only up to twenty, using their hands and feet. People had wooden stools with four legs and carved backs, hammocks made of cotton cloth or string for sleeping, clay and wooden bowls for mixing and serving food, gourds for drinking water and bailing out boats, and their most prized possessions, large dugout canoes, for transportation, fishing, and water sports.

They lived together in yucayeques (villages). It is believed that Taíno settlements ranged from single families to groups of 3,000 people. The Taínos were divided into three social classes: the naborias (working class); the nitaínos or sub-chiefs and noblemen, which included the priests and medicine men; and the caciques or chiefs. The cacique was an inherited position of great privilege. The cacique was above the individual villages, and he had more than one wife. Some of his wives were from political marriages that would unite villages and form alliances.

The Taíno achievements included building of ceremonial ball parks whose boundaries were marked by upright stone pillars, development of a universal language, Arawakan, and creation of complicated religious beliefs. All the gods lived in the sky. Yocahu was the supreme Creator. Another god, Jurakán, was always angry and ruled the power of the hurricane.

Other mythological figures were the gods Zemi and Maboya. The zemis, a god of both sexes, were represented by icons in the form of human and animal figures, and collars made of wood, stone, bones, and human remains.



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Taíno Indians believed that their zemis protected them from disease, hurricanes, or disaster in war. They served cassava (manioc) bread as well as beverages and tobacco to their zemis to make them happy. Maboya, on the other hand, was a night time god who destroyed the crops and was feared by all, to the extent that elaborate sacrifices were offered to keep him calm.

Myths and traditions were passed down through dances, drumming, oral traditions, and a ceremonial ball game played between opposing teams (of 10 to 30 players per team) with a rubber ball; winning this game was thought to bring a good harvest and strong, healthy children.

Taíno men sometimes wore short skirts. Taíno women wore a similar skirt called a nagua after marriage. Both sexes painted themselves on special occasions; they wore earrings, nose rings, and necklaces, which were sometimes made of gold. They didn't have many crafts: some pottery and baskets were made, and they carved stone, marble and wood.

The Taínos were farmers and fishermen. They made canoes and were good sailors. Their main crops that we know were cassava, garlic, potatoes, yautías, mamey, guava, and anón.. Also harvested were squash, papaya, pineapple, achiote, sweet potatoes, yams, and corn. Peanuts, guava, soursop, pineapples, sea grapes, black-eyed peas, and lima beans grew wild and were gathered.

Based on <http://www.topuertorico.org/reference/taino.shtml>